14“I Wish I Had a Man Like You,”[1] and Other Things Environmentalists Tell Bigfoot

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Spoiler Alert.

Seriously, this section contains major spoilers if you haven’t already seen the Indie hit of 2011, *Letters from the Big Man*, directed by Christopher Munch and starring Lily Rabe. In the film, former hydrologist for the US Forest Service (USFS) turned artist Sarah Smith (Rabe) escapes a messy breakup by heading to an Oregon forest on a solo trip for a contract survey of post-burn water quality. After a week or so alone in the forest, she moves into a cabin (ostensibly owned by the USFS), has a tryst with an environmental activist named Sean (played by Jason Butler Harner), falls in love with Bigfoot (played by Isaac Singleton, Jr.), and heads into the woods to live with him (Bigfoot, that is, not the activist). In the middle somewhere, we find out that the U.S. military is using logging rights on this forest as a smokescreen to hunt Bigfoot in order to create weaponry based on his ability to evade being seen, which apparently includes the capacity to create a debilitating sonic interference. Haven’t even heard of *Letters from the Big Man*? I promise this is a real film—it has an 86 percent rating from Rotten Tomatoes and a favorable review from Roger Ebert, who called it “unlike any Bigfoot movie you have ever imagined.”[2]

In essence, *Letters from the Big Man* is a film that takes itself, and Bigfoot, very seriously. And this is where the movie fails. But don’t get me wrong; I’m not saying that Bigfoot doesn’t matter. Rather the opposite; Bigfoot matters very much and is worth paying attention to. But the way that *Letters from the Big Man* takes Bigfoot seriously means that it misses all the ways Bigfoot really does matter and, instead, falls headfirst into the many problematic tropes that Bigfoot has been wrapped up with since his popular culture debut in 1950s America. Rather than consider the cryptid as the complex mess of cultural appropriation, kitsch, mythology, pseudo-science, conspiracy, and humor that he is, the film plays Indian,[3] contributes to racist ideas, and even heroizes logging. When compared to a different big man on film—the Page 194 →Tall Man in the “Hunting” episode of Season 1 of the FX series *Reservation Dogs*, it becomes even more clear how much *Letters’*s Big Man falters when humor and playfulness are left out of the Bigfoot script. This essay is a comparison of the two representations; through that comparison, it is also an argument that Bigfoot matters, matters a lot—but also shouldn’t be taken too seriously.

Bigfoot’s “Glass Ceiling”

When Munch devised the idea for *Letters from the Big Man*, he understood his task as creating a film that would finally take Bigfoot seriously. He also understood his approach as one in great contrast to that of most previous filmmakers, as "it was plain to see that authenticity has never been high on filmmakers' lists of priorities" when dealing with Sasquatch subjects.[4] Instead of following the typical plot and casting Bigfoot as a monster, Munch did extensive research, reading the many (many) books on the cryptid and watching the (in)famous Patterson-Gimlin footage (you know, the 1967 film of a Bigfoot striding across a creek in Northern California). The reliance on the Sasquatch monster trope is a cryptid "glass ceiling" that Munch set out to break.[5]

One of the primary sources that Munch consulted was David Rains Wallace's *The Klamath Knot*.[6] In fact, the book was so important to his understanding of Bigfoot and the Klamath region, it has a cameo in the film, falling out of Sean's backpack when he is rummaging through it to set up camp the first time he meets Sarah. Like Munch, Sean also seemingly subscribes to a version of natural history described by Wallace, that is, one that positions the Klamath region as place teeming with living fossils, creatures that have survived millions of years of evolution and avoided extinction there—including the sturgeon Sarah is shown snorkeling with just a few scenes before she first meets Sean. As a skeptical viewer, however, I couldn't be wowed by their millennials-long survival—rather, I only wondered how (and why) Sarah fit all that snorkeling equipment into her pack.

In many ways, *The Klamath Knot* is a classic work of nature writing, placed alongside texts such as *The Sand County Almanac* or *Desert Solitaire*. But, as Wallace's subtitle tells readers, his book is not just simply a natural history but an exploration of "myth and evolution."[7] This focus allows Wallace to understand his experience of the Klamath region (the mountainous forests of Southern Oregon and Northern California and the traditional homelands of the Klamath, Modoc, and Yahooskin tribes) as an experience of the ancient past. This happens through the experience of wilderness broadly, which, for Wallace, "generates mythological thinking; it leads the mind back to stories of origins and meanings, to imagining the world's creation."[8]

The belief in Bigfoot, that is, the belief that a large creature exists, unseen, in the vast North American woods, is also a belief in the mythology of wilderness. As I'm sure many readers of this volume are familiar with, *wilderness* is a problematic term in the history of the United States, troubled most famously by William Cronon. In his 1996 essay, Cronon tells us: "It is not the things we label as wilderness that are the problem—for nonhuman nature and large tracts of the natural world *do* deserve protection—but rather what we Page 195 →ourselves actually mean when we use that label."[9] Wilderness means many things—but in *The Klamath Knot* and *Letters from the Big Man,* it primarily means an escape from civilization, as something distant and apart from humanity. This also means that wilderness is a place to demonstrate traditional, American, rugged individualism, a place to overcome something, and a place to find yourself, as both Wallace and Sarah do in the Klamath wilderness. Cronon describes this phenomenon as an "escape from history."[10] Like the search for Bigfoot, wilderness preserves the rugged virtue of frontier culture, a place to escape the stress of urban or suburban life and return to a simpler and less civilized time. This is a nostalgic vision of wilderness, one that carries with it a sense of loss of all that has been destroyed by civilization and progress, however those ideas are defined.

Wilderness areas are small reminders of what is imagined to have been, whether this is the prehistoric past, a time before European settlement, or even a time before logging destroyed much of the old growth forest in North America. Wallace's mythological wilderness, which he finds in national forests like the Siskiyou, is tied not only to frontierism but also to the evolutionary past: "As the Siskiyou Forest demonstrates, though, living worlds are not always so different from worlds of long ago."[11] Like the sturgeon, Bigfoot is also believed to be an evolutionary remnant, a survivor of the Pleistocene or even earlier. Many Bigfooters (that is, those who hunt for evidence of Sasquatch's existence) believe that Bigfoot is really a Gigantopithecus, a large ape that lived from about 2.6 million to 11,700 years ago in present-day Southern China. Wallace and Munch's descriptions of the Klamath wilderness repeatedly return readers and viewers to these prehistoric moments through references to other ancient plant and animal species that have also avoided extinction. The Siskiyous, it seems, are the land that time forgot.

As a survivor, the Bigfoot in *Letters* is perennially under threat, and not only from the pressures of evolution. In the film, the Big Man is being targeted by the U.S. Department of Defense, which, conspiring with the US Forest Service, is seeking to capture a Bigfoot to, as Sean tells us:

> shoot him up with a shitload of Ketamine...they're going to put him on a plane. They're going to cart him down to the Yerkes Primate Lab in Atlanta. They're going to cut open his sinuses. They're going to try to figure out why he's so good at generating those nasty sound waves at 6 hertz or something that get in people's heads.[12]

In the film's rendering, the Forest Service has begun denying logging permits in order to clear the forest for military forces to hunt for an unknown creature. Aside from Sarah and the Big Man himself, the only other sensitively portrayed character in the film is Barney, a logger with whom Sarah shares her intimate journal of her experiences with the Big Man and her plans to go seek out the creature and live in the forest with him for a year. "Big guy's got a long memory. He knows what we're capable of," Barney tells her. Sarah responds, "Maybe it's time he knows what good we're capable of too."[13] The next time we see her, she's striding across a mountain field toward the Big Man, who casually waits for her, leaning against a tree. With Sarah's help, the audience thinks, the Big Man will survive this threat, just as he's survived in this forest for thousands of years. It's a love story for the ages—but Page 196 →also a message that perhaps we, the audience, aren't doing enough to save the forests, unless we're also willing to give up everything to go live in the woods with a mythic creature.

Leave Nothing but Footprints

Bigfoot is an oft-referenced environmentalist symbol in the United States.[14] The very idea that something as large as Bigfoot could exist undiscovered in the wilderness makes a case for preserving that wilderness—even if just for all of the other potential unknowns that might be there. Bigfoot is even a protected species in two Washington State counties! While these laws

may be facetious (the 1969 Skamania County Ordinance 69–01 was passed on April 1...),[15] the laws reference the ways in which other laws protecting endangered species, including the federal Endangered Species Act of 1973 (ESA), can be used for more general conservation aims. One of the main tools the ESA uses to protect listed species is designating their habitats as "critical," which allows the government to set aside large tracts of land important to species recovery. Critical habitat designations are also often used in lawsuits by environmentalists to prevent development or resource extraction, such as oil drilling or logging. The Pacific Northwest understands this use of the ESA all too well through the decades-long fight between logging interests, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and spotted owls.

But Bigfoot's link to wilderness makes the cryptid an excellent symbol for environmentalism more broadly. For many believers, Bigfoot is considered a model environmental steward. This belief is in line with understandings of Bigfoot from many Indigenous cultures such as the Klamath or Modoc. As Taylor Tupper, a Klamath Tribal Council member, said in an introduction to the crew of *Finding Bigfoot* when it visited the Klamath Reservation in 2016, "Bigfoot, *matah kagmi*, is a keeper of the woods, and so he makes sure that when you're out there, you're doing things, you're doing them in a good way."[16]

In a very less serious but perhaps more adorable way, Bigfoot is also a poster boy for "leave no trace" principles, a shared set of ethics meant to reduce harm by outdoor recreationists. Owing to the fact that Bigfoot is known only by its footprints, Bigfoot imagery is used frequently on signs and other materials asking hikers and campers to "leave only footprints." Even better, because Bigfoot is so notoriously difficult to photograph, the cleverest signs and bumper stickers ask you to "take only photographs, leave only footprints." These anti-littering, "leave no trace" designs featuring Bigfoot can be found on everything from travel mugs, iron-on patches, posters, notebooks, T-shirts, and more. I'm sure you've seen them—personally, on the cover of a spiral notebook I have, a very sweet Bigfoot walks in a brightly colored mountain landscape over the words: "Reduce your *FOOTPRINT.*"

With this kind of imagery in mind, it is unsurprising that the hero of Munch's film is the Big Man, the Bigfoot creature who shares his Sasquatch message with the deserving and forest-loving Sarah. The Big Man speaks directly to her in a dream: "Only with your open heart will you build bridges. It is with the new light in your heart that you will see."[17] Sarah, it seems, is doing things in a good way, not interested in activist clout like Sean but hoping to preserve the forest for the forest's sake. It is, after all, the place she "calls home," as she informs Sean the first time she meets him.Page 197 →

Playing Indian

One of the primary points of evidence Bigfooters use to prove the existence of Sasquatch is the long history of Bigfoot-like creatures in Native mythology. As Klamath Tribal Council member Tupper mentioned in her introduction to the *Finding Bigfoot* crew, the Klamath know of *matah kagmi*, a giant, hairy humanoid ape that appears in the forests of their traditional homelands in southern Oregon and Northern California. The word *Sasquatch* itself comes from the

anglicization of a Coast Salish word (*sƛ̓sqəc*) for a similar race of timber giants.[18] These mythologies are important to respect, but in many ways contemporary Bigfoot is a settler colonial cooptation of Indigenous epistemologies. As Daniel Loxton and Donald Prothero explain:

> Making this connection has the effect of conflating a rich variety of diverse cultural traditions into a single, modern composite. At best, the projection of modern monsters into Native American stories flattens context and nuance; at worst, it may become a naïve and even ugly sort of paternalism in which whites tell Native Americans what their tales "really" mean.[19]

Wallace attempts to ground his understanding of Bigfoot in Native epistemologies. In *The Klamath Knot* he notes how this unknowable creature "is connected in Indian mythology with a variety of forest mysteries, from the calls of screech owls to spirits of the dead."[20] However, he also claims that this being is called "'Omah' in Klamath Mountain Indian language, 'Sasquatch,' in Pacific Northwest Indian language, and 'Bigfoot' in English."[21] Just about the only name he gets right here is Bigfoot, as the creature is referred to as *matah kagmi* in Modoc, *Yay' ahya'has* in Klamath, and *Si-Te-Cah* in Paiute; *Sasquatch,* as explained above, is an English word, albeit one bastardized from Salish.[22] Here, the linguistic accuracy matters less for Wallace than establishing a Native precedent for the belief in Bigfoot.

More than that, the use of Bigfoot in Euro-American culture often is a sort of monster hunting playing Indian. According to historian Phil Deloria, playing Indian is a specifically American manifestation of primitivism, whose origin he identifies at the birth of the American nation-state with the Boston Tea Party, where rebellious colonists donned pseudo-Mohawk costumes and dumped tea into the Boston Harbor. Concerning the legacy of this event, Deloria writes, "for the next two hundred years, white Americans molded similar narratives of national identity around the rejection of an older European consciousness and an almost mystical imperative to become new."[23] For Deloria, playing Indian contains the desires both to glorify and erase the Indian. While the attempted genocide of American Indians was necessary for the expansion of the United States, American identity also relies on the appropriation of Indianness. According to Deloria, "Indians, it is clear, are not simply useful symbols of the love-hate ambivalence of civilization and savagery. Rather, the contradictions embedded in noble savagery have themselves been the precondition for the formation of American identities."[24]

The *New York Times* review of *Letters from the Big Man* exemplifies this in the critic's choice to summarize the film by using a Gary Snyder poem, which itself is heavy with Indian play:

> Page 198 →In his poem "The Way West, Underground," from his collection "Turtle Island," Gary Snyder writes vividly of "The split-cedar/smoked salmon/cloudy days of Oregon,/ the thick fir forests." The book's title refers to an indigenous creation story in which North America emerged from some soil placed on the back of a turtle by a woman who fell from the sky. In some versions of the story a muskrat helps her. The woman in Christopher Munch's lovely, delightfully idiosyncratic "Letters From the Big Man," resplendent with its own dense forests and cloudy Oregon

> days, has already fallen to earth and is looking for a way back up or maybe just forward. She gets help from a sasquatch.[25]

It is important to note that Snyder is not a native poet—yet Manohla Dargis, the film critic, senses that this white telling of a Pan-Indian origin story is the proper analogy for *Letters*.

And Dargis isn't really wrong here; the Indian play suits the film because the film itself, in its attempts to take Bigfoot mythology so seriously, participates more in primitivist Indian play than in depicting accurate depictions of a Native understanding of the Big Man. Taking a cue from Wallace, Munch attempts to reference the importance of the Big Man to local Indigenous people. However, like Wallace, *Letters* just seems to get a lot wrong. Along the way, the film depicts the only Native character it has through common filmic tropes of the noble savage or the mystical Indian.[26] More directly, several of the Bigfoot experts Munch references as consultants on this film are white men who have taken on "Native" names and also perform shamanism.[27]

As Sean, the environmental activist, is trying to get a handle on the Bigfoot phenomena he suspects Sarah is experiencing, he visits a local bison ranch and the Native woman we can assume owns it. His visit is particularly auspicious as it corresponds with the birth of a white buffalo calf. The woman who owns the ranch advises Sean to lead with his heart, as the buffalo do, and that while she acknowledges the U.S. government is after "what the Big Guy's got," she likes "to think the Big Guy is always going to stay one step ahead."[28] Not only is this buffalo woman a stereotypical mystical Indian, prophesizing the Big Man's survival based on the classic Indian good omen of the white buffalo calf, Sean gets to participate in his own version of Indian play through his visit and his receipt of the sage advice.

The story of the white buffalo, however, is so out of place in this Bigfoot tale that it can only be read as a primitivist trope. The myth of the white buffalo calf and the White Buffalo Women is a commonly told Lakota legend—people whose traditional homelands are the Great Plains of North America, primarily present-day North and South Dakota, Wyoming, Montana, and Nebraska—far from the Pacific Northwest of *Letters*.[i] For peoples outside of Page 199 →the Plains, the story of the white buffalo calf has much less significance.[29] Furthermore, bison themselves, even when they numbered in the tens of millions, likely never ranged as far northwest as Oregon and Northern California. Here bison and Plains Indian epistemology become stand-ins for Nativeness more generally. This reference to the white buffalo has the appearance of honoring Native culture, yet the specificity of Klamath or Modoc epistemologies are elided, even erased. Connecting the Big Man to this universal idea of Indianness also links Sean and Sarah to an originary identity in which they both can claim the forest as home.

Racialized Logics

In its seriousness, *Letters from the Big Man* traffics in stereotypes that are not only settler colonial but also mired in problematic tropes of Blackness. The obsession with prehistory and evolution interpreted from Wallace, has links in Bigfoot lore to troubling histories of racist pseudoscience and eugenics. The belief that Bigfoot might be a Pleistocene ape that somehow

survived Ice Age extinctions is frequently correlated to narratives of Bigfoot as a possible missing link, explaining the supposed evolutionary jump from monkeys to humans. Wallace describes it thus:

> Hominids branched off from tree-dwelling, apelike creatures perhaps six million years ago; and they include our ancestors, although nobody is sure which hominids we evolved from. Early hominids did not have tools or fire, but lived by eating whatever small animals or plant foods they could find. They must have been very tough, resourceful animals, and it is at least possible that one or more species of hominid could have survived to the present, intelligent enough to avoid extermination or general discovery, retreating to more and more rugged terrain as human populations grew.[30]

Even if indirectly, these stories of Bigfoot as the "missing link" play into social Darwinist, eugenicist, and pseudo-scientific narratives of human evolution that place those of White European descent at the top of a racist hierarchy. Sasquatch literature frequently refers to Bigfoot as a member of a "race" of giants, language that can further primitivize native peoples to whom White Bigfooters believe these humanoid creatures to be more closely linked. Missing link narratives have been historically very damaging to Black, Indigenous, and other people of color, sometimes even resulting in the kidnapping and public display of supposed wild men. This includes William Henry Johnson, a Black man who was exhibited by P. T. Barnum wearing a fur suit as the "What is it?," or Ota Benga, the Mbuti man who was forced to work at the Bronx Zoo and was sometimes displayed in a cage in the primate house as a missing link by William Temple Hornaday and Madison Grant.

When Sarah wistfully tells the Big Man, "I wish I had a man like you," audiences are meant to think of their relationship as an extension of his soul-and-species-expanding soliloquies delivered to Sarah in her sleep. But what this budding romance also recalls are the countless other interspecies passions in which similarly blond, white women are swept up and kidnapped by other monstrous primates. King Kong, anyone? As film scholar Rhona Berenstein demonstrates, many King Kong or other jungle horror films that featured a white heroine Page 200 →abducted by a simian monster were very much expressions of a fear of cross-species miscegenation—which also clearly translated into racialized categories in Jim Crow–era United States.[31] These films, mostly from the first half of the twentieth century, frequently reference missing link language, and their ape antagonists oftentimes are portrayed as more human than monkey-like. Set in the wild (and imagined) jungles of Africa, it is hard to deny the overt racism that encouraged viewers to read these ape monsters as the stereotype of the oversexed Black men, a stereotype frequently recalled as an excuse for lynching or other acts of terrorism against Black Americans. It perhaps goes without saying that films from the period also frequently portrayed Native men as similarly desiring and kidnapping white women.[32]

These racialized representations of King Kong are not limited to the early to mid-twentieth century. W. Scott Poole finds contemporary references that position Black men as monstrous alongside beautiful white damsels in distress. Comparing a 2008 cover of *Vogue* magazine featuring LeBron James and Gisele Bündchen to a 1933 *King Kong* poster featuring Fay Wray,

Poole argues that the 2008 photograph “reminded observers of the secret history of racial imagery in America and its tendency to transform African American men into monsters with white female victims.”[33] Bigfoot stories frequently traffic in similar tropes. Men’s magazines from the 1960s and ’70s, particularly, abound in stories about Bigfoot creatures capturing women or even of female Bigfoots kidnapping men to replace their lost mates, sometimes bordering on the pornographic (though not “proving love,” like the Tinglers discussed by Stentor Danielson in this volume).[34] In contemporary Bigfooting circles, women are still at risk, as it is believed that menstruating women attract Sasquatch, some even going so far as to deploy used tampons as bait. In his cultural analysis of the cryptid, independent scholar Joshua Blu Buhs argues that these stories and the tropes they contain are popular with “white working-class men because Sasquatchiana reflected their hopes, their fears, and their hidden desire.”[35] Bigfoot stories help maintain mythologies of masculinity in rapidly changing twenty-first-century economies.

In an attempt to take Bigfoot seriously, Munch pays little attention to other things, like the broad and damaging cultural stereotypes, that Bigfoot could be related to. Sarah goes willingly into the forest to live out a romantic fantasy with Bigfoot, but the fact that the only Black actor in *Letters* (Isaac Singleton, Jr.) is cast as the Big Man should not go unnoticed. Wanting to trust Bigfoot literature so thoroughly, Munch and those casting for the film never stopped to question what other motivations individuals may have for retelling Bigfoot stories—especially stories that seemingly link the creature romantically or sexually with white women. The Big Man’s messages to Sarah are always peaceful and aimed at interspecies harmony, but during other moments the Big Man is depicted as angry or aggressive, bashing sticks against trees, or able to upend massive trees in response to logging in the forest. Singleton’s portrayal of the Big Man does little to challenge these earlier troubling portrayals of simian monsters in film.

The problem here isn’t just limited writing and narrow research but rather the belief that taking Bigfoot as seriously as possible is the only way to “authentically” represent it. Taking Bigfoot and Bigfooters at their word leaves little room for poking fun at troubling logics and racist tropes and stymies possibilities for critique in the representation of Bigfoot. That is not to say that Bigfoot doesn’t matter—the cryptid very much does. But it matters in messy and complex and funny ways that can’t simply be captured in naïve searches for authenticity.Page 201 →

“We’re Indians, We Don’t Own Land”

Sterlin Harjo’s FX series *Reservation Dogs* is perhaps a master class in using dark comedy to deal with life’s most difficult circumstances: settler colonialism, cultural genocide, suicide, poverty, love, family, and teenagers. That list also includes Bigfoot or, as he is referred to in the program’s sixth episode, The Tall Man. *Reservation Dogs* frequently features creatures, beings, and figures from Native mythology as characters in the series—some, like the Deer Lady (Kaniehtiio Horn), step in temporarily to teach brief yet powerful lessons, while others like Spirit (Dallas Goldtooth) offer mostly comic relief. The Tall Man does a bit of both but also helps mend generational divides and seems to settle ambiguous land disputes—or maybe unsettle them.

In “Hunting,” Episode 6 of Season 1, Willie Jack (Paulina Alexis) wakes up her father (John Proudstar) early one morning to go hunting. Without giving too much away (for it is well worth watching), Willie Jack ends up mentioning to Leon, her father, that she recently saw a picture of an extra-large buck, nicknamed “Chunk” by her and her cousin, on his trail cam. Her father responds that he doesn’t have a trail cam, but maybe the land owners do. Willie Jack is surprised: “Don’t we own this land?” she asks her dad. “Ha, no,” Leon answers. “We’re Indian, we don’t own land.”[36] As she continues to question why they always hunt there, he explains that their family used to own that land, but his grandfather sold it in the 1930s and now some Texas ranchers own it; Leon figures they plan to keep it because “Texas ranchers don’t give shit back.” His concern then returns to the trail cam she described: “I’ve never seen them, so I just started hunting the land, but if you say you’ve seen a trail cam, they might be back, there might be poachers, but not like us, like different poachers.” Willie Jack then leads him to the camera, and the audience is delighted with a montage of them dancing, being chased by a wild turkey, and generally goofing off in front of it. “Hopefully they don’t have us on camera,” Leon says.[37]

So what does all of this have to do with Bigfoot? Well, following the conversation on land, the father and daughter also discuss why it’s been a year since he last hunted at the site. Some of the apprehension has to do with the fact that Willie Jack and Leon always used to hunt with Daniel, Willie Jack’s cousin, who audience members know died sometime in the previous year. They both miss him terribly. But Leon also admits that the last time he was on this land, “a few weeks before muzzleloader season, I came up here first light, I was bringing bags of corn like I do from time to time, and I saw something.” “What’d you see?” Willie Jack asks. “It was hard to describe,” Leon answers, “this being, it was covered in hair, and I, I thought it was Tall Man, it had these eyes, and they were looking right at me, and they were glowing, and it just scared me to the bone.” Willie Jack wonders if maybe it was Daniel, but Leon jokes: “Daniel couldn’t even grow a mustache. Nah, it was Tall Man.”[38] Still, Willie Jack muses that somehow it was connected to Daniel’s spirit saying goodbye.

After this, Willie Jack and her father both reflect on how glad they are to have finally come out to this land and hunted together. It has given them a chance to discuss Willie Jack’s future plans and their grief, anger, and regret over losing Daniel. It has strengthened their bond. Quietly, Chunk, the specific deer Willie Jack has been after for years, appears, and the screen goes black as a gunshot rings out. The camera cuts to the deer carcass in the back of their pickup truck, which pulls away, leaving a pair of glowing red eyes in a very hairy face watching them from the trees.

Figure 1. Still of the Tall Man, from *Reservation Dogs*, Season 1, Episode 6. All seasons of FX's *Reservation Dogs* are available to stream on Hulu. mpub.14540576.cmp.61.

Page 202 →Here, the Tall Man watches over the forest like *Letters*'s Big Man, except this Tall Man is sometimes the butt of the joke. He's scary and mysterious—but the main plotline of the episode centers around the trail cam, which is of unknown origin. The trail cam, in capturing Willie Jack and Leon's dance party antics, is an impotent poaching deterrent—but also fails hilariously in its other main purpose of capturing wildlife imagery. This points to the confounded relationship between Bigfoot and photography, a medium that sets itself apart because of its reliance on indexicality and an ability to create truth claims. A clear photograph, besides a physical specimen, is the Holy Grail of Bigfooting, the thing that many think would prove the creature's existence once and for all. But this camera offers none of that evidence.

Instead, this trail cam points to the complexity of land ownership. The Tall Man's presence, one that is presumably never captured on that trail cam, signals continuous Indigenous occupation of the land, despite it falling into the hands of unnamed Texas ranchers, who themselves are hysterically caricatured in the glimpse we get of the two anonymous ranchers hunting in those woods. The Tall Man of *Reservation Dogs* is a much more nuanced figure than the romanticized Big Man. He challenges settler colonial land grabs, strengthens the bonds between a father and a daughter, and helps Wille Jack and Leon process the loss of Daniel. But he does this all through his enigmatic existence—he's there but not there, real but not real. And he might be a prankster.

Bigfoot Does Matter!—But Not Seriously

I hope by this point you are starting to see Bigfoot's value to visual culture studies and beyond. And while I am offering a warning about the risks of taking Bigfoot seriously, as Page 203 →demonstrated by *Letters from the Big Man*, I am also advocating that Bigfoot should be taken seriously, but not *only* seriously. In many ways, Bigfoot is a valuable teacher. Melinda Howard, an expert in STEM education, makes the case for using Bigfoot as an example of the power and importance of using story in Indigenous science education.[39] After working with a group of teens at a STEM summer camp for Native youth in the Pacific Northwest where students consistently included representations of Bigfoot in their models for stream ecosystem restoration, Howard learned:

> Much like Bigfoot's concealed and enigmatic existence, teachings of place-based and culturally-specific knowledge were revealed to me unexpectedly through tribal stories and student representations of knowledge....Stories of Bigfoot reveal that he is a mirror of human needs: He coexists with us and relies upon many of the same resources. Thus, it is wise to consider his needs in addition to our own for a harmonious coexistence.[40]

This approach, seeking a harmonious coexistence with nature that considers the needs of Bigfoot within an ecosystem does sound a bit like what Sarah and Wallace in *Letters* are seeking. Yet Howard's emphasis on the cultural specificity of these Bigfoot stories is an important detail egregiously lacking in both *Letters from the Big Man* and *The Klamath Knot*. Howard's understanding of Bigfoot's place in science education, furthermore, makes space for understanding Bigfoot from multiple lenses and encourages her to question the Euro-American-centric understanding she comes to science education with. But I would argue we could push Howard's consideration even further, or with more humor.

It may seem disrespectful to Native cultures to not take Bigfoot completely seriously—but in fact, missing out on the humorous qualities of Bigfoot lore is missing out on an important aspect of Indigenous culture in North America: Indian humor. As Vine Deloria, Jr., writes:

> One of the best ways to understand a people is to know what makes them laugh...It has always been a great disappointment to Indian people that the humorous side of Indian life has not been mentioned by professed experts on Indian Affairs. Rather the image of the granite-faced grunting redskin has been perpetuated by American mythology.[41]

According to Deloria, shared humor generates cultural vitality, and when it does that in the face of systemic oppression, it not only helps people cope but is also incredibly subversive. It seems that the many white folks who take all Bigfoot accounts without the proper skepticism are not only not in on the joke but perhaps the butt of it.

By taking Bigfoot seriously in the humanities, we can do a lot more than just incorporate Indigenous knowledge systems into our study of history and material culture. Rather, understanding the complex history of the representation of Bigfoot and Bigfoot-like stories, we can see the ways in which modern Bigfoot imagery is wrapped up in these messy histories that

combine Indigenous ways of knowing (including different ways of referring to and describing Bigfoot based on cultural specificity) and racialized logics and settler colonial appropriation. But understanding Bigfoot through a lens that incorporates Indian humor, as Sterlin Harjo does in *Reservation Dogs,* embraces Bigfoot in all his goofy glory. Taking Bigfoot (and other similarly weird cultural subjects) seriously isn't just about believing every Page 204 →story and taking every Bigfooter at their word but rather about laughing with and at some of these storytellers, going into the woods even if it scares us, and dancing in the face (or cameras) of ignorant Texas ranchers who should perhaps frighten us more than any monster tale. As Deloria says: "When a people can laugh at themselves and laugh at others and hold all aspects of life together without letting anybody drive them to extremes, then it seems to me that that people can survive."[42]

[i]At a time in the distant past, the Lakota people were starving and a woman appeared to them. She bestowed upon the Lakota a ceremonial pipe, taught them how to tend fires, gather food, cook, and offer the proper prayers to the buffalo. When she took her leave, she promised to return to the Lakota again during times of great need—then as she walked in the direction of the setting sun, she rolled over four times. The first time she rolled she became a black buffalo, the second time a brown buffalo, the third time a red buffalo, and the fourth time a white buffalo calf. When she disappeared over the horizon, a large herd of buffalo appeared, offering themselves to the Lakota. Because of this, white buffalo calves are incredibly sacred to the Lakota. Story summarized from a version told by Archie Lame Deer in Robert B. Pickering, *See the White Buffalo*, Denver: Denver Museum of Natural History Press, 1997, 16-19.

Notes

1. 1.Christopher Munch, *Letters from the Big Man,* MBG Art & Film and Antarctic Pictures, United States, 2011.
2. 2."Letters from the Big Man," https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/letters_from_the_big_man; Roger Ebert, "There's Something in the Woods," November 30, 2011, https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/letters-from-the-big-man-2011
3. 3.See Philip J. Deloria, *Playing Indian* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998).
4. 4.Christopher Munch, "About the Film: Director's Statement," *Letters from the Big Man* official website, http://www.lettersfromthebigman.com/p/about-film.html.
5. 5.Munch, "About the Film."
6. 6.Munch, "About the Film"; and David Rains Wallace, *The Klamath Knot: Explorations of Myth and Evolution* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1983).
7. 7.Wallace, *Klamath Knot*.
8. 8.Wallace, *Klamath Knot,* 8.
9. 9.William Cronon, "The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature," *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature,* ed. William Cronon (New York: W.W. North & Company, Inc., 1996), 81.
10. 10.Cronon, "Trouble with Wilderness," 80.
11. 11.Wallace, *Klamath Knot,* 15.
12. 12.*Letters from the Big Man*.

13. 13.*Letters from the Big Man.*
14. 14.Joshua Blu Buhs, *Bigfoot: The Life and Times of a Legend* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 232–38.
15. 15.The Board of County Commissioners of Skamania County, County Ordinance 69-01, adopted April 1, 1969.
16. 16.*Finding Bigfoot,* "Squatching on Sacred Ground," Season 8, Episode 7, Animal Planet, aired April 7, 2016, 47 min.
17. 17.*Letters from the Big Man.*
18. 18.Wayne Suttles, "On the Cultural Track of the Sasquatch," *Coast Salish Essays* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1987), 73–99.
19. 19.Daniel Loxton and Donald R. Prothero, *Abominable Science! Origins of the Yeti, Nessie, and Other Famous Cryptids* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 31–32.
20. 20.Wallace, *Klamath Knot,* 72–73.
21. 21.Wallace, *Klamath Knot,* 72.
22. 22.Stephen Floyd, "Klamath Tribes to be Featured on 'Finding Bigfoot,'" *Herald and News,* April 5, 2016, https://www.heraldandnews.com/news/klamath-tribes-to-be-featured-on-finding-bigfoot/article_472ed1ad-750a-59f1-8448-a8e9e3cb97bf.html.Page 205 →
23. 23.Philip J. Deloria, *Playing Indian* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 2.
24. 24.Deloria, *Playing Indian,* 4.
25. 25.Manohla Dargis, "In the Deep Forest, an Unusual Bond, and Untamed Beauty," *New York Times*, November, 10, 2011, https://www.nytimes.com/2011/11/11/movies/letters-from-the-big-man-stars-lily-rabe-review.html.
26. 26.Michelle H. Raheja, *Reservation Reelism: Redfacing, Visual Sovereignty, and Representations of Native Americans in Film* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2010), 148.
27. 27.Munch, "About the Film."
28. 28.*Letters from the Big Man.*
29. 29.Robert B. Pickering, *See the White Buffalo* (Denver: Denver Museum of Natural History Press, 1997), 52.
30. 30.Wallace, *Klamath Knot,* 75.
31. 31.Rhona J. Berenstein, "White Heroines and Hearts of Darkness: Race, Gender, and Disguise in 1930s Jungle Films," *Film History* 6, no. 3 (Autumn 1994).
32. 32.John A. Price, "The Stereotyping of North American Indians in Motion Pictures," *The Pretend Indians: Images of Native Americans in the Movies,* ed. Gretchen M. Bataille and Charles L. P. Silet (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1980), 75.
33. 33.W. Scott Poole, *Monsters in America: Our Historical Obsession with the Hideous and the Haunting*, Waco: Baylor University Press, 2018, 104.
34. 34.Buhs, *Bigfoot,* 159–68.
35. 35.Buhs, *Bigfoot,* 159.
36. 36."Hunting," *Reservation Dogs*, Season 1, Episode 6, directed Sterlin Harjo, FX, aired September 6, 2021, 26 min.

37. 37.Harjo, *Reservation Dogs.*
38. 38.Harjo, *Reservation Dogs.*
39. 39.Melinda Howard and Anne Kearn, “The Role of Story and Place in Indigenous Science Education: Bigfoot in a Youth-Designed Ecological Restoration Plan,” *Cultural Studies of Science Education* 14, no. 4 (December 2019): 915–35.
40. 40.Howard and Kearn, “Role of Story and Place,” 916.
41. 41.Vine Deloria, Jr., *Custer Died for Your Sins: An Indian Manifesto* (New York: Macmillan, 1969), 146.
42. 42.Deloria, Jr., *Custer Died for Your Sins,* 167.

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